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Abstract

Cultural Identity and Language: research into the nature of the acquisition of cross cultural identity by exploring the repetitive process of weaving as a metaphor for the repetitive nature of language learning. The sub-thesis examines both Vietnamese national identity and feminine ideals through an analysis of the role of the feminine heroine in the national epic poem, *Truyện Kiều* (The Tale of Kiều). A study taking the form of an exhibition of textiles exhibited at the Canberra School of Art Gallery from February 18 to 22, 1997 which comprises the outcome of the Studio Practice component (67%), together with a Sub-thesis (33%), and the Report which documents the nature of the course of study undertaken.

I would like to thank the following people: Alex Panscorini, Judith Rutherford, Kevin Brown, and the staff of the Canberra School of Art, for their support and inspiration. To Lindsay Macdonald for the gift of the loom, Peter Schwarz, Arlene Murphy, Veronica Gaudin for the gift of the loom, and the staff of the Canberra School of Art, for the gift of the loom. I would like to thank the following people: Alex Panscorini, Judith Rutherford, Kevin Brown, and the staff of the Canberra School of Art, for their support and inspiration. To Lindsay Macdonald for the gift of the loom, Peter Schwarz, Arlene Murphy, Veronica Gaudin for the gift of the loom, and the staff of the Canberra School of Art, for the gift of the loom.

I also wish to acknowledge the Canberra School of Art, ITA, ANU for its generous financial assistance that has enabled me to give undivided commitment to my studies.

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Tôi rất mang ơn cha mẹ tôi: công sanh thành dưỡng dục, sự hy-sinh kiên nhẫn và giúp đỡ để cho tôi có ngày nay. Công ơn này ví như biển rộng sông dài. Tôi nguyện khắc chốt ghi tâm.

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I also wish to acknowledge the Canberra School of Art, ITA, ANU for its generous financial assistance that has enabled me to give undivided commitment to my studies.

Contents

abstract

acknowledgments

Introduction 1

Identity Badges 4

496 hours (binding cloths) 16

Stringing Sentences 26

Conclusion 31

Bibliography 33

study proposal

curriculum vitae

Language is a poignant negotiation of identity. What confronted by one language (and of mobility) it is difficult to refrain from thinking about one's identity, and how others perceive your own identity. To be reliant on disposable documentation to prove my identity is a habit I have had to do without. My birth certificate was destroyed in Vietnam and when I became an American citizen I was not entitled to a passport because I was a child under 16 years of age. Therefore I have often had a frustrating journey my identity to official matters - I am not here, but not quite there. There has been a time in my life when in order to prove my identity I have had to write in language, images, signs were completely devoid of possessions and identification, floating, adrift, on an unfamiliar ocean, and were to suddenly disappear with the boat, leaving nothing behind. How do you make known your wishes, let alone request you to open your mouth, move your vocal cords and utter a few words of your own language. This has been my situation. These experiences are often referred to as a negotiation of one's being. Vietnamese by the Vietnamese community, I was not accepted and accepted me greatly about my cultural identity. This has struck at the heart of my imagination and speech which don't quite understand my own point of identity. Perhaps this is because I have had to off load some of the aspects of Vietnamese into its heard aspects of this culture and have had to negotiate with others concerning language and identity.

Introduction

It is not sufficient for Vietnamese to know by heart a portion of the national epic, *Truyện Kiều* (The Tale of Kiều). The significance of *Truyện Kiều* in Vietnamese culture has been explained in this way:

Often psychologically and socially estranged in a host country where language may be not understood, many derive spiritual comfort from *Truyện Kiều* in their mother tongue. They know most of its lines by heart and when they realize their own fate, they speak their mother tongue as its finest.

The poem is considered the pinnacle of classical Vietnamese literature and by the Vietnamese, from all walks of life, it is considered as their "cultural bible". The importance of this text to the Vietnamese people and the way in which it is revered in their culture has aroused my interest and prompted me to gain knowledge of it. It is a key, a password into a culture I feel not quite a part of and for this reason *Truyện Kiều* is pertinent to my exploration of identity.

The learning of this piece of literature is a central concern of the work I have produced and the manner in which I have produced them. The significance of *Truyện Kiều* for my studio practice is not for the reason that the poem makes extensive references to textile terminology¹ but its importance has been in the process of learning this piece of literature through the medium and manner of producing woven works. It is my desire and intention to create a tapestry of this poem and the medium of identity has been challenged for this purpose. Tapestry is particularly appropriate because its production involves a

¹ <http://www.vietnam.vietnam.net/kythuat.htm>

² Nguyen, 1996, pp. 23-24

³ The poem is an approximation of the original text and is not a translation.

Language is a poignant expression of identity. When confronted by one's language ability (and or inability) it is difficult to refrain from thinking about one's identity and how others perceive your own identity. To be reliant on dispensable documentation to prove my identity is a habit I have had to do without. My birth certificate was destroyed in Vietnam and when I became an Australian citizen I was not entitled to a certificate because I was a child under 16 years of age. Therefore I have often had a hard time proving my identity in official matters - I am not this but not quite that. There has been a time in my life when in order to prove my identity I have had to rely on language. Imagine if you were completely devoid of possessions and identification, floating aimlessly on an unfamiliar ocean, and were to suddenly encounter a UNICEF French floating hospital. How do you make known your identity? Let me suggest you open up your mouth, move your vocal cords and utter a few words of your mother tongue. This has been my situation. These experiences accompanied with the non-acceptance of me as being Vietnamese by the Vietnamese community here, has obsessed and concerned me greatly about my cultural identity. Their perception is prompted by my mannerisms and speech which don't quite pronounce my Vietnamese identity. Perhaps this is because I have had to off load some Vietnamese in order to take on board aspects of this culture and in doing so I have had to contend with issues concerning language and identity.

It has been said that to be Vietnamese is to know by heart a portion of the national epic poem *Truyện Kiều* (The Tale of *Kiều*). The significance of *Truyện Kiều* to Vietnamese outside their homeland is explained in this way;

Often psychologically and socially estranged in a host country whose language they do not understand, many derive spiritual comfort from Nguyễn Du's masterpiece. They know most of its lines by heart and when they recite them out loud, they speak their mother tongue at its finest.¹

The poem is considered the pinnacle of classical Vietnamese literature and by the Vietnamese, from all walks of life, it is considered as their 'cultural bible'. The importance of this text to the Vietnamese people and the way in which it is revered in their culture has aroused my interest and prompted me to gain knowledge of it. It is a key, a password into a culture I feel not quite a part of and for this reason *Truyện Kiều* is pertinent to my exploration of identity.

The learning of this piece of literature is a central concern of the work I have produced and the manner in which I have produced them. The significance of *Truyện Kiều* for my studio practice is not for the reason that the poem makes extensive references to textile terminology² but its importance has been in the process of learning this piece of literature through the methods and manner of producing woven works. It is my desire and intention to commit to memory a passage of this poem and the medium of tapestry has been employed for this purpose. Tapestry is particularly appropriate because its production involves a

¹ Nguyễn, Du, 1983: xl

² The poem makes approximately 89 references to textile terminologies.

repetitive process. The element of repetition, which alludes also to endurance and discipline, is prevalent in the works produced as part of my studio component.

Three main projects were undertaken in constructed textiles. The first work titled 'Identity Badges', based on the idea of Chinese rank badges, uses tapestry weaving as a medium. This work began immediately after the approval of my study programme to allow for maximum weaving time. Each tapestry varied in its construction time, from one month to one week. The pace of my progress quickened due to the nature of repetition (and to a lesser extent, physical abuse of my body). The second project, the weaving of binding cloths, titled '496 hours', took a year of thinking, two months to make and about ten months of pondering and contemplation. This work draws on my interest in cloth weaving and the custom of footbinding. Correlations are made between the weaving process and that of binding. The third work, 'Stringing Sentences' was the last work to be executed and it could not have been otherwise. I needed the skill and experience in working with rayon and cotton in order to construct this work as articulately and as fluently as I am able. Rather like learning the vocabulary, tense and word order to be able to construct a sentence. 'Stringing Sentences' explores the relationship of the structure of Vietnamese written languages; *chữ nôm* (old script) written vertically right to left and *quốc ngữ* (modern day Vietnamese) written horizontally left to right.

Each of the three projects will be examined separately providing concepts, traditions, themes and references which inform the individual works as well personal thoughts and motivations that have influenced the making process.

Identity Badges

Chinese metal badge, 4th rank official, circa 1870.
Collection of Judith R. Kohn



Chinese rank badge, 4th rank (civil), circa 1775.
Collection of Judith Rutherford.

This body of work, consisting of 27 (18cm x18cm) tapestries examines identity and language learning through the medium of tapestry weaving. Rank badges (Mandarin squares) have been mimicked as identity badges and woven repetitiously to convey a correlation between the process of the medium and the process of language learning. A passage of *Truyện Kiều* (The Tale of Kiều) will be learnt and memorised through the course of making this work.

The Writing Systems of Vietnam

The Vietmanese written language since the ninth century has had three writing systems; *chữ nho*, *chữ nôm*, *quốc ngữ* as a direct result of influences from centuries of foreign occupation. Chinese characters (*chữ hán*) were introduced into Vietnam during the millennium of Chinese occupation (111BC - 939AD) and were used as written symbols with pronunciation in Vietnamese. This was called *Hán Việt* (Sino-Vietnamese). Long after the country was annexed from China, the writing system *chữ nho* (scholar's characters) continued to be employed exclusively in literature, education and government transaction in Vietnam until the 'invention' of another writing system - *chữ nôm* at the end of the thirteenth century.³ *Chữ nôm*, (meaning demotic or vulgar script) was formed out of Chinese characters which were modified to be used singly or in combination. This adapted script looked somewhat like Chinese but was undecipherable to the Chinese themselves. In semantic and phonetic terms this language succeeded in most cases, however it was cumbersome and did not carry the prestige of *chữ hán* - the language of officialdom.⁴ The writing system *quốc ngữ* (national language) is the transliteration of Vietnamese into Roman characters, which has its origins in the Roman Catholic missions in South East Asia and in Vietnam in the early 17th century. The usage of this language remained largely within Catholic circles until the end of the 19th century at which time it gained the popular currency it still has today.

These differing scripts meant that the Vietnamese scholars in the late seventeenth century, had at their disposal three written languages with which to express their thoughts and ideas. However in the early periods of *chữ nôm*⁵ and *quốc ngữ*, writers lacked the knowledge and experience of these languages to successfully employ these scripts and traverse between them. Hence the use of them was often untidy obscure. Effective usage required a double awareness of the cultural context of these language. Likewise when translating, an awareness of the cultural context of

³ The exact date of the invention of this written language and its author (or authors) as yet is not conclusively determined. Research is being carried out at present in Paris and Vietnam. For a comparative look at *chữ nôm* and Chinese see '*Chữ nôm*, the demotic system of writing in Vietnam', (Nguyễn, 1959: 270).

⁴ Not until the early eighteenth century with the arrival of works such as *Phan Trần, Truyện Kiều, Chinh-phụ Ngâm* and *Cung-Oán Ngâm-Khúc* did *chữ nôm* become recognised as a language for scholarship and as a medium of literary expression.

⁵ The early period of *chữ nôm* was up to the beginning of the 19th century, during which time the language was often written with the significant omitted, using only the phonetic and this resulted in much confusion between homophones.

the original text and the context into which it is to be projected. Translation of languages is referenced in my work as an analogy to the cross cultural experience with languages.

Literary Examination System and Rank Badges

In China, the elaborate civil service examination system had its formation during the Tang dynasty in which knowledge of the Confucian canon - Five Classics and the Four Books, were almost exclusively tested. In theory, the Chinese believed that every person from every walk of life had an opportunity to rise up the social scale to the highest positions of honour and influence through the literary examinations.⁶ The literary examinations were introduced into Vietnam in the 11th century and were based on the Chinese system, though they did not duplicate the system in either complexity or rigour.⁷ Success in the examinations lead to the acquisition of status and were thus the ambition of every candidate for a chance at civil bureaucracy, which at worst lead to a post as provincial mandarin and at best, high office at court.

The attainment of rank through examinations or by Imperial decree was indicated by badges. Known as Mandarin squares or rank badges, these pieces of woven or embroidered textiles were worn on the front and back of robes or jackets. This practice was introduced in China during the Ming dynasty (1369-1644) and was adopted in Korea in 1454, and in Vietnam this system of denoting rank was introduced in 1744.⁸ Korean badges of civil rank were distinctive in their size being about half the proportion of Chinese squares and were rectangular in shape. Vietnamese badges were closer in their rendering of Chinese squares, however the badges had a prevailing red colour and were also noticeably smaller in size. Chinese rank badges were graded in nine orders and featured the design of various species of birds for civil officials and military ranks were distinguished by animals. The ranks were bestowed by the emperor, however officials had to provide their own squares, thus the designs, materials and quality varied tremendously. It was considered a wiser investment to purchase embroidered rather than woven badges, in the case of promotion or demotion, the rank symbol on the embroidered squares could be replaced with ease. Less familiar were Chinese badges which contained writings of auspicious phrases instead of birds and animals in stylised landscape. These badges did not denote rank and were worn by the imperial family and their household on occasions such as festivals and the emperor's birthday. Other character badges were bestowed by the emperor to elderly gentlemen who had continuously attempted the examinations but consistently failed and thus held no official rank. These are known as Four Character badges and contained the phrase 'conferred by imperial grace.' The badges do not come in identical pairs as rank denoting badges but with a back badge containing a *shou* (longevity) character. As this is the symbol of immortality the

⁶ Yutang, 1936: 33

⁷ See chapter 4 of 'Vietnam and the Chinese Model' (Woodside, 1988: 169).

⁸ Schuyler Cammann, known for his research on the origin of Chinese *kesi* has been accredited as the discoverer of Vietnamese rank badges in the 1950's. See (Cammann, 1992: 119).

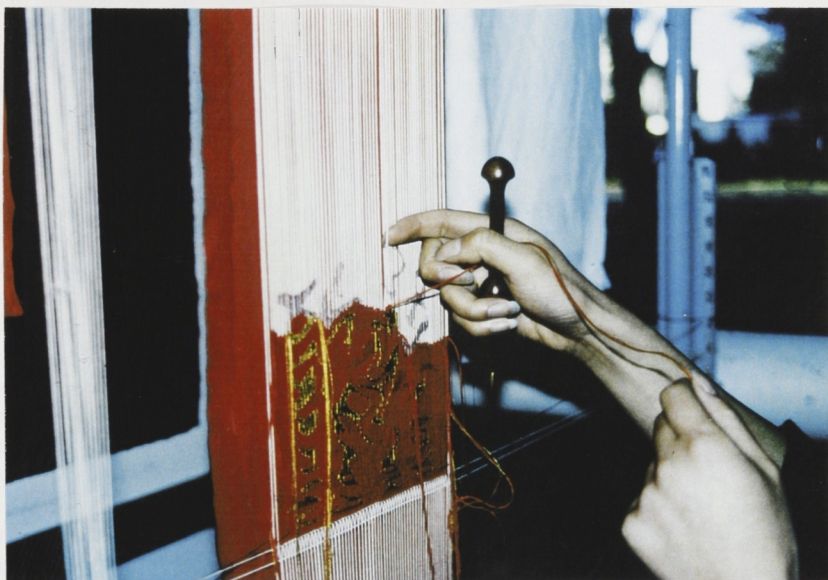
recipient of these badges often were buried with their badges, hence surviving examples of these are rare. Another type of character badge, not indicators of rank, were ones intended as gifts to honoured officials leaving their posts and were given by grateful former subjects.

In the late 1920's and early 1930's Chinese rank badges became highly sought after, not as symbols of rank by nobles and officials, but by antique dealers and collectors as possessions. When I first encountered rank badges, they were majestically framed by glass in an ornate frame. The grandness impressed me as I had anticipated, however I felt a sense of the displacement of the object. These badges have been detached from their original owners to become collected items or made into decorative accessories such as cushion covers, ladies handbags or tablemats. These once hard earned objects were now reduced to exquisite objects, hard earned nevertheless but only in monetary terms. This experience left me with a deep impression that urged me to work for my own badges and to realise the importance and value of working in order to earn. My encounter with these awesome badges in overwhelming multitude was to two years later provide an influence for the presentation of my own badges. In adopting the idea of rank badges as identity badges I wanted to allude to the image of these pieces of woven textiles being worn on a person, an individual. Though there is an emphasis of a rigid linear structure in the presentation of the work, this is to reference not so much to status and position as discipline and order. The image is akin to lemmings or candidates queuing to receive their pieces of paper. The underlining element of rank comes into play as the identity squares are positioned on low individual plinths and as such is very much in keeping with Vietnamese social etiquette which requires one to humble oneself in the company of others, thereby elevating them. In this status minded society it is also important and is the concern of everyone to apply a correct title in social intercourse. The expression 'to call a spade a spade' according to Nguyễn Đình-Hoà does not adequately translate the concept, because Vietnamese etiquette requires one to call a spade a GMC steam shovel, but never a spoon.⁹

In looking at a tapestry as an overall image it is sometimes easy to dismiss the yarns which provide the image and structure and which are put there individually and subjected to countless hours of handling. This raises the exhausted question about time. Tapestry weaving is not recommended for result-oriented people due to the nature of the process which can be dauntingly slow and monotonous. Over time and with repetition the pace may quickened and they maker becomes proficient. I am reminded of a passage in *The Unknown Craftsman* by Soetsu Yanagi in which he talks of Sung ware being decorated with characters by young boys in Tz'u-chou who were illiterate. The Chinese characters were meaningless yet what was demanded of these children was endless repetition of the same composition and this repetitive monotony produced amazing dexterity and quickness of hand.¹⁰ The process of tapestry weaving is an integral part of my work, the characteristic of the medium that some identify as being slow is a necessary component. Archie Brennan

⁹ Nguyễn TMHP, 1980: 34

¹⁰ Yanagi, 1972: 134



weaving the tale

accounted for the speed of the medium when he said, "The problem is not that tapestry is too slow, but that the rest of twentieth-century life is too fast."¹¹

A connection can be drawn between the process of tapestry weaving and language learning and calligraphy. These processes require not so much patience as self-discipline to maintain the repetitive course. To perfect a stroke (perfect that selvedge, tame the rayon) or achieve a particular tone of a language is to practice regularly, this point cannot be over-emphasised. The preface of Spoken Vietnamese maintains that 'Foreign language learning is the development of a new and different set of habits, and habits, of whatever sort are formed only by constant repetition.'¹² But repetition alone cannot allow for the links and parallels. The other characteristic of tapestry is the sequence and order in which sections are woven, this completely disqualifies randomness. A tapestry begins at the bottom and gradually evenly builds up, along the way threads travel left to right and visa versa in an orderly manner rather like structuring a sentence. There is an eloquent flow. Within the medium of calligraphy there are rules governing stroke sequence. The late Chen Chih-mai in his work 'Chinese Calligraphers and Their Art' clarifies the importance of stroke sequence: 'the ability to do the characters in accordance with stroke-sequence is the foundation of writing. Wrong stroke-sequence is an unpardonable offence, a mark of the illiterate. Besides, it will make the finished character look odd and unsightly.'¹³ Of course with tapestry weaving lack of sequence makes for near impossibility.

In tapestry weaving, the basic weave structure is consisted of a series of horizontally placed threads (weft) and another vertically placed (warp). The horizontal threads move under and over the vertical threads, travelling back and forth. The fabric that is formed by this manipulation can be called Chinese *kesi* (also *k'o-ssu*) or European goblin, but the difference is indicated by the relative dimensions of the two. Chinese *kesi* is made up of an average of 20 vertical threads and 100 horizontal threads per cm², whereas goblin fabric consists of approximately 10 and 20 respectively. *Kesi* literally means cut or carved silk. This term refers to a distinguishing feature of *kesi* which are the slits in the tapestry where two different wefts meet at the edge of a colour area and are turned back. The process in Chinese is succinctly described as *tongjing duanwei* to mean 'woven continuously through the warp [but] with the weft cut'.¹⁴ *Kesi* weave was introduced into Japan and became *tsuzure-ori* (fingernail weaving). The weaving process of these miniature tapestries is awesome in their meticulousness and intenseness. The basic tool of *tsuzure-ori* weavers are their fingernails of which three are filed serrated on each hand of the weaver who uses one at a time until it is worn down and moves on to the next nail while giving time for the other to grow back. The fineness of my tapestries can not begin to be compared to *kesi* or *tsuzure-ori*, nevertheless fine enough for my fingernails to be indispensable to my work in which I use to pick the warp of the tapestry. The slits of

¹¹ Harris, 1996: 10

¹² Jones and Huynh 1979 :1

¹³ Chen, 1966: 188

¹⁴ Sheng, 1995: 70

kesi tapestries were made a feature of in my work, though unlike *kesi* slits mine are easily visible with the naked eye. These wondrous slits function as gaps that exist in the understanding of language and culture of a dual cultural person. There is a constant struggle with what one knows and one ought to know, indeed a fine line but the gulf is sometimes immense.

To enable the maintenance of a repetitive weaving rhythm, the backgrounds of my tapestries were kept subtle in texture and mon colour. The more colour blending employed and the use of different materials would interfere with the monotony of the process. At the same time I wanted to add to the surface of the tapestries a quality that invites an intimate viewing of the work. This micro reading is an experience that captivates and inspires me about woven textiles. Therefore the background surfaces of the tapestries have explored a wrapped warp technique, the blending of cotton and rayon and the weaving of these two materials separately. The surface quality of this work was inspired by eccentric (curving weft) weaving of Coptic tapestries¹⁵ and influenced by the work of Scottish tapestry weaver Sara Brennan. The simplicity of her compositions and the richness and depth of her tapestries appeal to me and the manner in which weave. The Arthur Boyd tapestries¹⁶ in the NGA collection has also been a source of reference, in particular the technique of wrapped warp weave which has been explored in one series of the Identity Badges.

There are three series of tapestries that make up this work and they reference the evolution of the Vietnamese written language. The first six lines and the concluding three lines of *Truyện Kiều* was woven in the characters of *chữ nôm*, in French and *quốc ngữ* Vietnamese. The lines in English are as follows:

A hundred years-in this life span on earth
talent and destiny are apt to feud.
You must go through a play of ebb and flow
and watch such things as make you sick at heart.
Is it so strange that losses balance gains?
Blue Heaven's won't to strike a rose from spite.
...the heart outweighs all talents on this earth.
May these crude words, culled one by one and strung,
beguile an hour or two of your long night.¹⁷

Since the late 19th century there have been numerous publications of *Truyện Kiều* in the languages of *nôm* and *quốc ngữ* as well as translations into different languages including ; Japanese, Romanian, Chinese, German, Polish and French. In my research for an understanding of this culturally significant text, I have been fortunate to be able to access the poem in two languages. On my first reading of the

¹⁵ The Coptic period in Egypt was late second century to seventh century AD.

¹⁶ Arthur Boyd commissioned the Portuguese tapestry workshop Manufatura de Tapeçarias de Portalegre to make a series of twenty tapestries (2.4 x3.5m) from St Francis of Assisi, works in pastels.

¹⁷ (Nguyễn, 1983: 3,167) 'The Tale of Kiều'. trans ST Huỳnh.

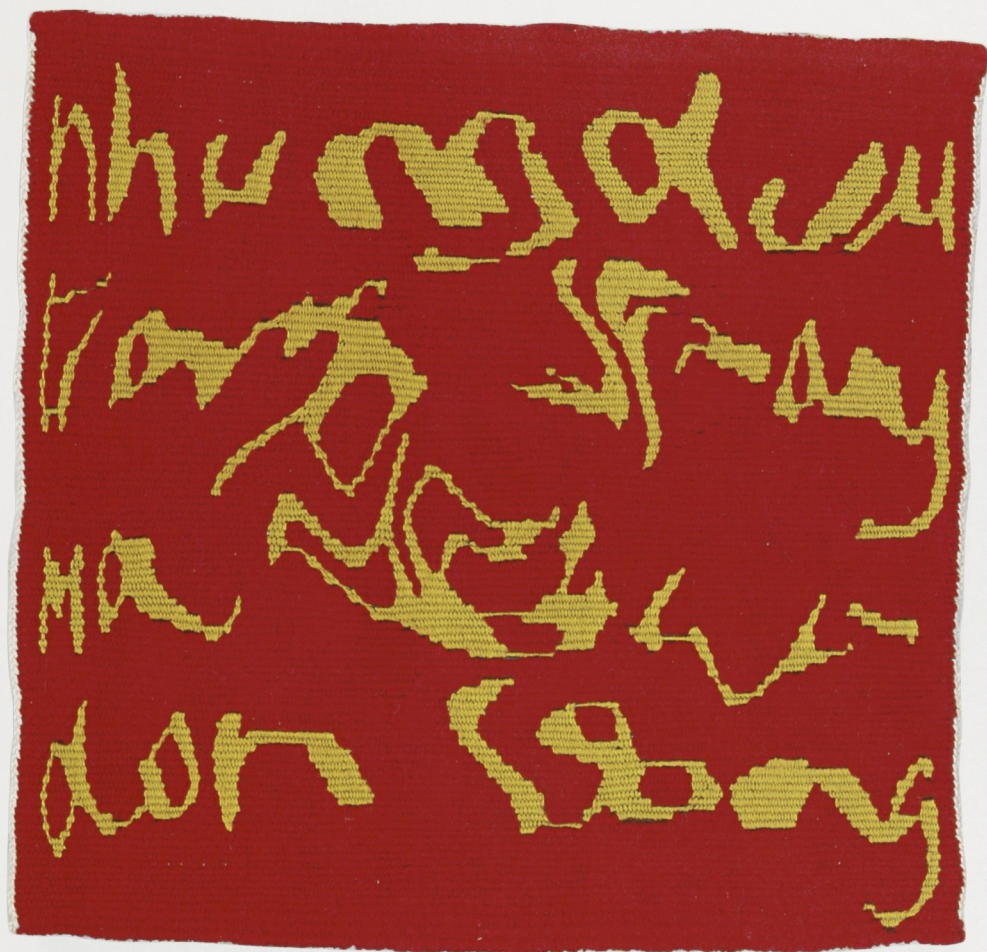
poem in English I realised only too quickly the power of translation to distort - by the loss and addition of information. For instance a vital feature of the Vietnamese text is the song quality (achieved by rhyming meters). This aspect was lost and some expressions were untranslatable. I became aware and fascinated with the process of translation - the manipulation of language and the sometimes utter distortion of meaning when reproducing the precise corresponding word.

Comprehension is not an easy thing, especially when one weaves in and out of two languages without having complete grasp of either. Occasionally this works to your advantage because it enables different perspectives and insights hence adding to comprehension, but for the most part, the gulf of confusion is vast. Reading *Truyện Kiều* I traverse between Vietnamese and English, likewise in my everyday living. The shifting from one language to another, have meant that I have had to learn such lessons as the enormous difference between 'a sore eye' and 'an eyesore'. The way I structure my sentences in careless moments of total abuse and disregard for languages, can be very awkward and incoherent. The text in my tapestries have been manipulated with the aid of the photocopier, computer and use of handwriting, rendering it harder to decipher as languages: to add ambiguity and a sense of not quite this but not that either. as
or texts

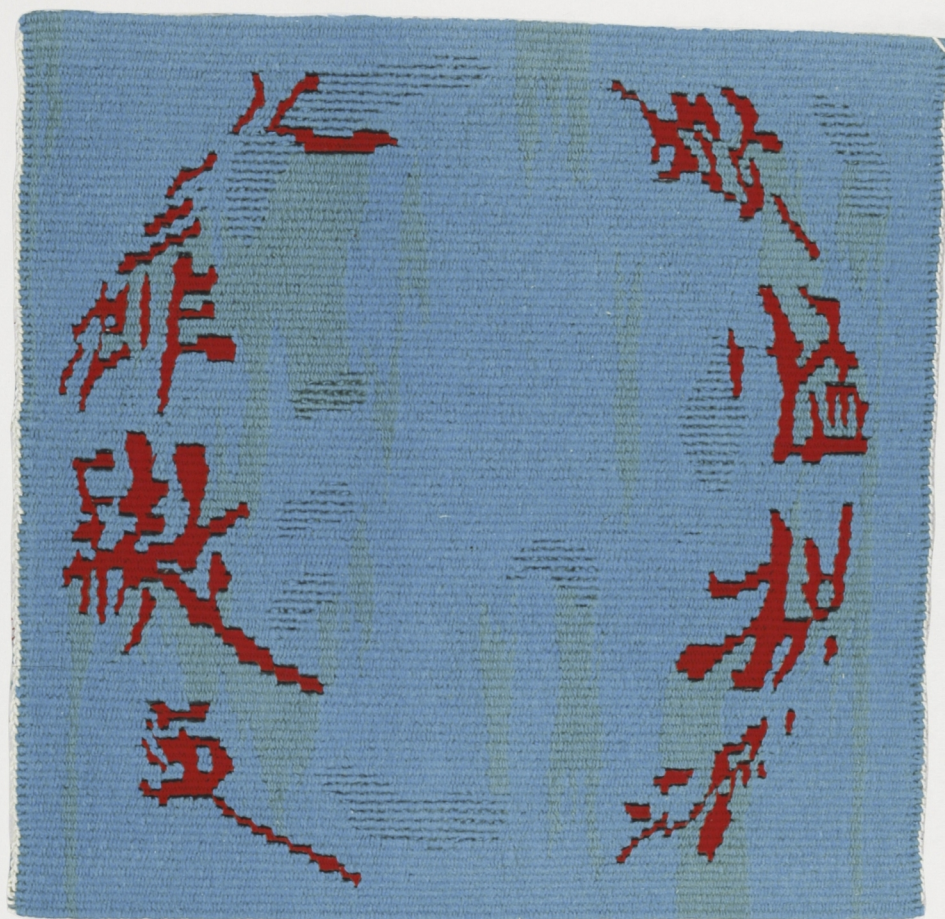
One artist that has employed the use of language as a tool to communicate about nonsense and learning is the artist Xu Bing who is best known for his installation of 1987-92 'A Book From The Sky.' The 4000 characters carved in Song dynasty style script from woodblock took him over one year of carving everyday. He says of the experience, 'my life was just eat, sleep and carve...I felt very quiet, not thinking too much.'¹⁸ Appearing so authentic yet not one character was. His inspiration comes from Chinese traditions and prior to carving he spent a great deal of time studying dictionaries of classical Chinese. Making nonsense from sense, his audience, those who knew how to search, searched vainly for meaning. In this way Xu Bing's work can be compared to *chữ nôm* language of Vietnam when viewed by Chinese readers. This intensely focussed man is the god of repetition (his MA dissertation dealt with the repetitive imagery in Warhol's prints) who spent nearly four years as he said just to make one joke.¹⁹ He makes a mockery of learning, for no matter how much learning you have, it is useless for deciphering his work. His comment on the futility of expression and the inability to communicate in modern times is poignant to his political and cultural situation, but it is also true of people who are caught between two languages without firm grounding in either.

¹⁸ Smith, 1993: 45

¹⁹ Smith, 1993: 45



Identity Badge - Vietnamese series, No. 4



Identity Badge - *nôm* series, No. 9



Identity Badge - French series, No. 1

496 hours (binding cloths)



'casting the shuttle'

My aim in this project was to weave a length of plain weave single cloth 3 inches (7.5 cm) wide by 100 ft (60 metres) long. The work was executed on a floor loom over a period of two months. The process of footbinding informs this work in making correlations between the process of cloth weaving and that of binding. The two processes involve elements of repetition and discipline. Footbinding is a process of binding (and unbinding) in order to control and direct the growth of the foot, and one which is continuously practiced over a drawn out period of time. Cloth weaving of the nature intended in this work requires repetitive manipulation of threads to construct a fabric. In binding as in weaving 'the longest journey begins with the first step.'²⁰

The footbinding custom was most common among women of China, but not uncommon amongst men. To a lesser extent the tradition was practiced by women in Vietnam and Korea. In general, footbinding can be summed up as having served three purposes and these accommodate the spectrum of ethics to aesthetics, critics to connoisseurs. Firstly footbinding has been perceived as a device for the suppression of women and as a measure to preserve their chastity by ensuring the separation of the sexes. Secondly the bound foot served as a symbol of aristocratic gentility and as flagrant proof of affluence, mainly on the part of the male. To the Chinese male it has been said that 'the bound feet is the condition of a life dignity.'²¹ Thirdly a perceived purpose of the practice was to satisfy a love fetish of the tiny foot, this interpretation of the practice came into being during the Yuan and Ming dynasties. A woman's sexual attraction came to be centred in the mystery of her bound feet in which her beauty was also determined.

My interest in footbinding lies in the tradition and particularly in the process of the practice. A tradition of a culture is deeply held by values, patterns and feelings. They become what they are over time, and time it will take to change a tradition. An important tradition to me and one which I have made a feature in this work is the tradition of cloth weaving. At this point a connection might be made with the weaving of bandages by women who employ the products of their labour. The success or failure of footbinding depends on the application of the bindings. Binding begins at an early age with a cloth of silk or cotton three inches wide and approximately two metres long. To begin:

A. Bind the four toes once around. B. Then pull the binding toward the outside; turn it toward the planter, tightly binding the four toes. C. From the inside of the foot, pull the binding toward the front point and turn it tightly around the big toe. D. Wrap the heel from the outer side of the foot, and pull the binding toward the front point. Wrap the front, except for the big toe. E. Wrap the instep, go around the ankle, and return to the instep. F. Turn toward the heel, and wrap the binding from the inner side of the foot to the front point. G. Wrap from the inner side and over the instep to the outer side.

²⁰ An old Chinese proverb. (Chan, 1985: 26) The first step I took to depress a loom pedal and the first most excruciating step a young girl takes after her feet are bound to apply pressure on the four toes.

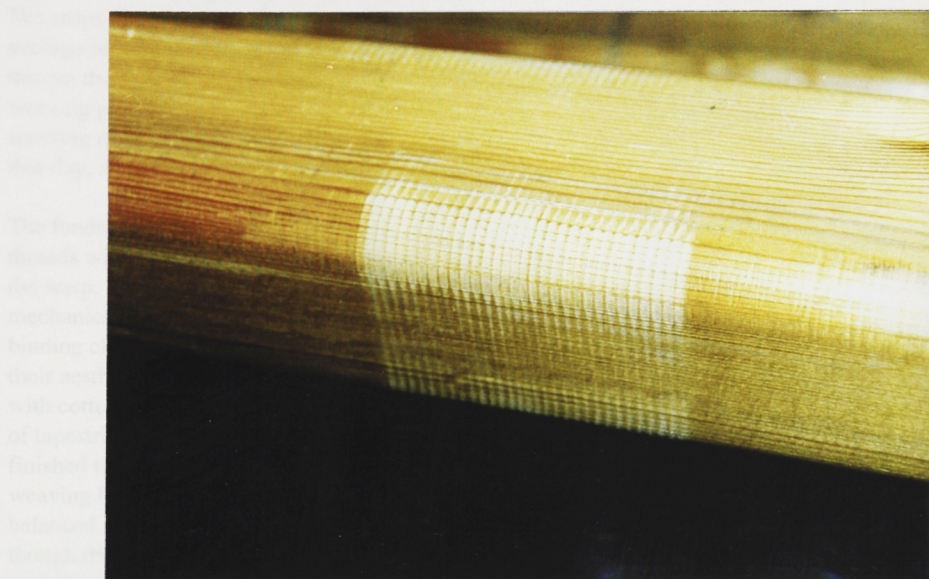
²¹ Levy, 1966: 89



binding cloth unravelled

...the binding beam through the parted the
...the binding beam through the parted the

...the binding beam through the parted the
...the binding beam through the parted the



marking from binding cloth on cloth beam of loom

...the binding beam through the parted the
...the binding beam through the parted the

The weaving nature of the textile - from warp to weft and back again, requires an intellectual effort, involves a continuous, a little repetitive, but a sense of rhythm, and time. The weaver's whole world, the passing of time itself, seems to be a repetitive activity. I now feel - conscious and unthoughtful, somehow, is an essential factor in the weaving, to achieve better results. Be it with handlooms or power. Through the experience of this work, I began to feel a binding of a physical nature - to a weaving beam and the piece of fabric on my body more so than anything I have known before. Weaving, weaving does not touch or compare. However the kind of binding I am referring to is not a material of construction, or a personal kind. Through this work I have been able to experience, passion and discipline, but more than that I have been able to experience deep feelings and emotions. My binding cloth was with me, and I have been able to see part of my thoughts, dreams, wishes and fears. I have been able to see the binding aspect of this work allowed me to see the deep thinking.

...the binding beam through the parted the

...the binding beam through the parted the

Wrap around the heel and pull the binding back towards the part of the binding cloth on the instep.²²

This concludes the process of binding but the binding process is repeated daily, weekly, yearly to achieve the desired effect, a measured foot, a three inch 'golden lotus'. The weaving process of my work entails measurements of a different kind. The strips of cloth, woven in two parts took approximately 496 hours to weave at an average pace of 40 picks (passes of the shuttle) per minute. In total I would have thrown the shuttle about 1,190,400 times. I kept a calculated track throughout the weaving process as a way of gauging my daily and weekly process. At the end of a weaving day I counted my empty bobbins to see how much work I had accomplished that day. And ever so slowly, the number of empty bobbins increased.

The fundamental technique of weaving is the process of interlacing of vertical warp threads with horizontal weft threads of which the latter is inserted at right angles to the warp. I emphasise this simple aspect of cloth weaving because it is the mechanics of weaving that interests me. The materials used in the construction of my binding cloths; nylon monofilament and cotton seine twine, were employed not for their aesthetic values but for their property of strength. I have long been intrigued with cotton seine twine used as warps in tapestry. This material forms the backbone of tapestries and more often than not it is hidden, especially in the presentation of the finished tapestry. Out of my fondness for this material and because of my cloth weaving background (where the interlacing of warp and weft threads share a more balanced role), I made a conscious effort to expose the warp in this work. My cloths, though they appear to be warp faced, are in fact weft faced. That is the number of weft threads are greater than the number of warp threads (in this case 45:5), therefore the weft threads are packed tightly to give a dense fabric. The process of this work was an internalising act, evident in the structure of my cloth, what is most visible are the entrapped warp threads.

The weaving nature of the binding cloths; repetitious and monotonous, requires no intellectual effort, minimum concentration, a little coordination, a sense of rhythm and some time. The emphasis was on time, the passing of time whilst one is engaged in a repetitive activity. Time that is continuous and uninterrupted, unbroken, is an essential factor in the training to achieve better results, be it with footbinding or bonsai. Through the execution of this work, I experienced a binding of a physical nature - to a weaving loom and the physical demand on my body were unlike anything I have known (cross country running does not begin to compare). However the kind of binding I am referring to is of a cultural, of expectation, of a personal kind. Through this work I wanted to know about endurance, patience and discipline, but more than this I wanted to know something about fortitude and resilience. My binding cloths were made not only of nylon and cotton but also of my thoughts, dreams, wishes and needs, all woven into the fabric. The making process of this work allowed me the time for deep thinking.

²² Levy, 1966: 25



binding cloth (3" x 1200")

The question as to how best convey my thoughts about this work in the presentation and display of the finished cloth became a real issue once the weaving was cut from the loom and all tension was lost. Sixty metres of cloth laid unravelled on the ground before me to contemplate. I was confronted with an intimidating sense of dismay. It dawned upon me that this cloth had the potential to say too much and at the same time nothing at all. What I most wanted to avoid was the conjuring up of images to do with stereotypes about footbinding. I was compelled to allude to binding because not only are feet bound, hands, eyes, ears, heads and tongues can and are also bound. I was so immersed in the making of the work that little thought was given as to what was to become of the cloth. Like travelling on a long journey I had focussed my attention on the immediate present, for I had hoped to gain an experience from this exercise, and thus thought not of gaining a finished product. My inability (or perhaps unwillingness) to look into the horizon for fear of dread and digression, left me feeling quite overwhelmed about my bindings. I entertained many thoughts about the arrangement of the binding cloths of which I will relate a few. An image from Feng Jicai's 'The Three-Inch Golden Lotus' described footbinding bandages on a washing line which left a lasting impression on my mind and I wanted to allude to the loveliness and sensuality of binding cloths as objects or symbols to be acquired and beheld. The fragment of text from the novel I referred to contained these words :

The old woman took a big piece of blue cloth and cut it into strips. She starched the strips in a basin and took a wooden hammer and beat them until they became smooth and glossy. Then she hung them on the clotheslines in rows in the backyard. When the gentle wind blew, the strips twisted and flapped around, making faint clicks as they hit against each other. Now and then they curled up like cinnamon twists until they could twist no more, and then they uncurled in the opposite direction. Often the strips on this side of the yard had just untwisted when those on the other side were just twisting up.²³

I also wanted to reference repetition and multiplicity and thought to cut the bindings into short lengths, many lengths of bandages, but this would not speak of the continuous weaving period. I was hesitant and restricted in my play and experiments with the binding cloths partly because I had not cut the umbilical cord to the work and partly because I had experienced the making of it and was nagged by a feeling of preciousness towards it. At the end of each 'play' session I would spend a long time rolling up the strips into coils to store away. I grew familiar with the form of the bindings in this way. In this position the bindings conveyed the repetition and quietness I had known while making them. For now the bindings will maintain this composition, later I may feel compelled to use them for their potential purpose - after all there is enough length to send any enthusiast into a binding frenzy. There is a Korean performance artist whose work I have drawn inspiration from. Moon Joeing Kyu's work explores the timeless philosophical dilemmas of life and death which he struggles with in his personal life. Bondage features a prominent

²³ Jicai, 1994: 12

clement in his work. He rounds up his audience and wraps them with rolls of electrical tape or rope. The fascination for him lies in the act of bondage, the process in which an interaction arises between him and his audiences. The bondage and submission he refers to is to do with lovers, family and society.²⁴ I have also been interested in the work of Hung Lui (b.1948), a painter and installation artist whose work touches on the theme of footbinding in relation to the subservient status of Chinese women. Her work uses very powerful images of footbinding, for example the work of 1989 titled 'Goddess of Love/Goddess of Liberty'. This work is a diptych. The image on left panel depicting an image on a porcelain cup of naked lovers making love and the feet of the woman are bound. The right panel is of a seated woman with her bound feet exposed and gazing directly at the viewer. Other elements and objects are displayed; a ideogram for 'wife' and a broom (the ideogram for 'wife' is a combination of the characters for 'woman' and 'broom'). The images in this work are thought provoking and pungent. For me, the images of naked bound feet create an immediate sense of unease, perhaps for the reason that they are so very profound. Thus I have refrained from incorporate images of bound feet in my work and have been compelled only to allude to them.

One source of inspiration for this work has been West African strip weaving where there is a great tradition of weaving cloth as narrow as one inch wide to usually 4-6 inches wide. The strips are often made into large cloths by sewing selvages together. What is interesting is that whilst women and men weave, the latter are considered professional weavers who weave on horizontal looms, these are called man's loom or strip loom. By contrast the women, weaving on vertical looms, weave cloth for their own use and as part of their domestic work. The warps in a man's loom are horizontal to the ground and are tensioned between the cloth bar and a weighted stone on a metal sheet or box about sixty feet in front of the loom. These warps are extraordinary in length and the warping up method (in which threads are not wound as such, but are walked) is awe inspiring.

Another tradition that has informed this work is Japanese bonsai which uses wire to train and manipulate branches (unlike the Chinese practice where this is done entirely by pruning). The practice of collecting and stunting trees, like footbinding can be considered a rich man's craze. The process of wrapping and snapping branches to control and direct growth bears striking similarity with the practice of footbinding. The success of the desired effect of the plant/feet depends on the skilful application of the wire/bandages around each branch/foot. The Vietnamese term for the indulgence in the art of bonsai is *chơi kiếng* (to play with bonsai). My father has been 'playing' with bonsais since 1969 and today with one hand he still 'plays'. His plants show obvious signs of scarring and over wiring which is an indication of extremity in the training of a bonsai. Suffice to say my father has demonstrated in his endeavour to teach me 'the greatest suffering ensures the greatest result.'

²⁴ See (Lee, 1994: 76)



bonsai *chơi kiểng*

This work uses the medium of tapestry weaving as an analogy for the structuring of sentences and explores correlations between the old and new forms of written Vietnamese. The work emphasises two structural elements of tapestry weaving - the warp and weft, the xy axis, the vertical and horizontal. A series of 112 (5cm x 5cm) tapestries were woven in groups of six and eight and remain attached by the warp. The groups of tapestries were then manipulated as weft and warp 'threads' to be woven into a larger 'tapestry'. The tapestries intended to be vertical contain characters of *chữ nôm* while those horizontals contain diacritic marks of the Romanised Vietnamese. The technique for warping a continuous warp was borrowed from a more complicated technique used in traditional Salish looms where the loom is threaded so that the completed weaving opens up to twice the length when removed from the loom.

The woven 'sentences' are taken from *Truyện Kiều*. These lines were chosen for their emphasis on the movement of the hand in the process of writing which is more expressive in Vietnamese. The swift action of writing or the measured pace of weaving, both entail a sense of rhythm. The particular segments of text are:

rút trăm sợi giắt mái đầu
 she pulled a pin out of her hair and graved
vạch da cây vịnh bốn câu ba vắn
 four lines of stop-short verse on a tree's bark
tay tiên một vẩy đủ mười khúc ngâm
 her hand dashed off ten lyrics at one stroke
tay tiên gió tấp mưa sa
 her nymphic hand moved like a lashing storm
nàng vâng cất bút tay đề
 the girl complied-she raised the brush and wrote
tiên hoa trình trước án phê xem tường
 then laid the sheet of paper on his desk
lời quê chấp-nhặt đông-dài
 may these crude words, culled one by one and strung
mua vui cũng được một vài trống canh
 beguile an hour or two of your long night²⁵

'The Tapestry Poem' in Li Ju-chen's novel *Chung-Hua Yuan* (Flowers in the Mirror) was the inspiration for this work. This poem I am told may be read backward, forwards, up and down, in squares, whorls, diagonally and in dozens of other combinations, but it is not possible to be translate it from the Chinese.²⁶ The numerous ways in which the tapestry poem can be approached leads to the idea of a sentence that is constructed in a grammatically incorrect manner and generally very poorly that leads to misunderstanding and ambiguities. This work is probably best

²⁵ Nguyễn, 1983. 'The Tale of Kiều' trans, Huỳnh ST. Lines: 99, 100, 206, 403, 1453, 1454, 3253, 3254

²⁶ For an image of the poem see Hsin-shen Chang Kao's dissertation of 1977 'Allegory and Satire in Li Ju-Chen's *Ching-Hua Yuan*'. p.148

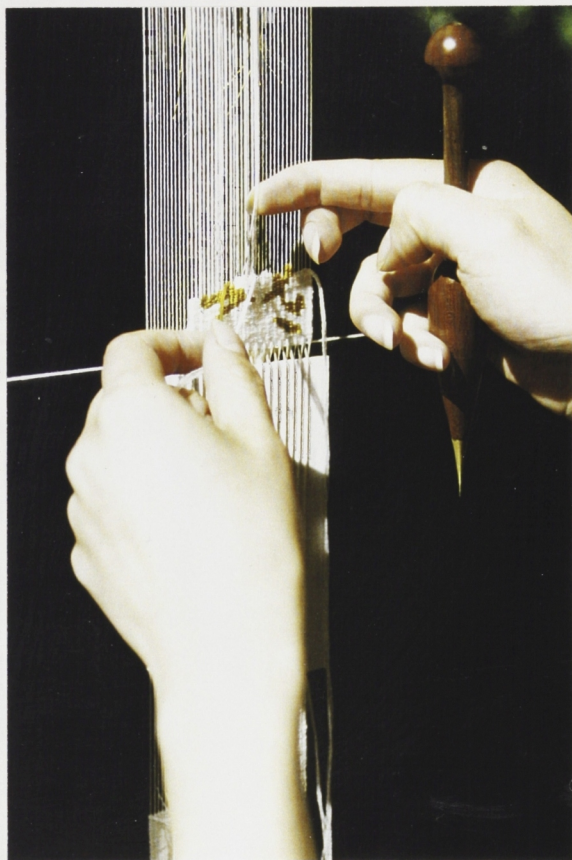
understood with in relation to the accumulated dozens of drafts which I produced in the process of writing my sub-thesis - an experience that motivated this work. The struggle and desire to write English not only coherently, but eloquently, was felt by me for the first time in 17 years and was my greatest drive.

Education, literacy and scholarship were greatly prized in Chinese and Vietnamese cultures. In Australia today the expectation of Vietnamese parents on the children to study is still strongly prevalent. An individual's desire for academia, more often than not is motivated by the possible enhancement of one's own reputation and that of one's family. The quiet yearnings of one's parents becomes a stern demand for excellence and achievement and therefore the drive is fuelled by filial piety, on the part of the child, and a face-saving exercise for the parents. My father used to threaten to send us back to Vietnam if our grades started slipping or if we were not diligent enough in our studies, but he did not realise that our perception of that country was unlike his, nor was our concept of communism.

Two elements of Chinese calligraphy have simulated this work; the seal and square practice sheets. The interest in seals was for the reason that it served as identification and its importance to a scroll or a work of calligraphy is like that of a signature to a painting. The practice of stamping seals on art works originated in the Tsin dynasty and became standardised in the Sung dynasty.²⁷ I have spent many long hours enthralled by the images and compositions of seals, for to me, they are works within works. Seals are liken to identification of symbols in tapestries in the form of signatures or workshop monogram, woven as part of the fabric of the tapestry or painted on the selvages.²⁸ The form of my tapestries, in small squares reference the squared sheets for practicing composition by beginners of calligraphy. The process of stroke sequence is followed by the process of combining radicals to form characters. Practice sheets serve as a guide to be used over a lengthy period of time to achieve a level of proficiency. The practicing and learning process is done by copying and imitating, not dissimilar to the process of weaving tapestry where by the weaver follows the traced markings on the warp. A better illustration is of tapestry workshop weavers weaving works not created by them and therefore a stronger emphasis is placed on precision and accuracy in copying the cartoon.

²⁷ Chen, 1966: 246

²⁸ See Appendix I of *Tapestry Mirror of History* (Thomson, 1980: 200).



picking the warp



Stringing Sentences (detail)

The repetitive manner in which I have chosen to undertake my work relates to learning and discipline. The lines from *Truyện Kiều* have been learnt by rote. This process has not given me a profound understanding of messages from the poem because the repetitive nature accompanied an element of disengagement with the task immediately before. Instead I now know these lines in French, *chữ nôm*, and *quốc ngữ*, or at least I am able to weave them. However the detachment from these lines have freed and broadened my mind for more insight and understanding of the whole poem and its context and significance, of which the experience of writing the sub-thesis has also contributed. Learning by rote, I have committed to memory only the words of the poem and therefore I am now capable of 'backing the book'.²⁹ The familiarity and importance of *Truyện Kiều* to the Vietnamese people is connected with their oral tradition of poetry. In their company now I can recite from the poem (the whole nine lines I know) and feel a sense of attachment and belonging to a culture which I might otherwise feel adrift from. However it occurs to me at this conclusive point in my study that I recite the lines from *Truyện Kiều* with a rather unique accent - one that indicates I have been in Australia a long time. A realisation that perhaps like Bernard Shaw's Eliza Doolittle who has learnt English too well and therefore is taken to be a foreigner, I too have learnt *Truyện Kiều* too well. That is to say, I have learnt about the poem and not the poem.

²⁹ Reciting from memory to the teacher was known in China as 'backing the book'. Young students studying for scholarship were required to exercise their mind in this way.

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Study Proposal

Aim: To obtain knowledge of Vietnamese written language through the study of the national epic poem, *Truyện Kiều*. I wish to further my understanding of Vietnamese culture and view my own position in relation to Vietnamese identity.

To produce a body of work extending my previous technical and conceptual processes in Textiles with a focus on tapestry weaving.

Studio Practice

The proposed studio component explores cultural borrowings and adaptation by way of the examination of Vietnamese written language. The medium of tapestry weaving will be used to explore the processes of learning, manipulation and translation of text. Tapestry weaving shares a measured and meditative process with the learning of calligraphy. The movements of the hands in rhythmic repetition, form and shape the characters and texts. The monotonous rhythm echoes the chanting of *Truyện Kiều*. A connection is made between the act of learning a tonal language by way of pronunciation drills and the movement of threads through the warp. The adaptation of Chinese and Vietnamese insignia badges as identity badges explores written languages and cultural identity. It is intended that text will be woven in tapestries to produce a series of tapestry work. The mechanics of tapestry weaving will be emphasised to reference repetition in order to correlate the relationship between weaving and learning. By repetition, it is hoped that a familiarity with the text of the poem will be acquired. X

In spite of the unchanging text of *Truyện Kiều* being available for over two centuries, the changing interpretation of its meanings and its use in various contexts is evidence of the accommodating nature of the poem. I am interested in the popularity and importance of *Truyện Kiều* in Vietnamese societies and the ongoing interpretation of the messages that filter into the personal lives of the Vietnamese people. In wishing to convey the accommodating nature of this text, I have used translation as a metaphor. As well as making references to the evolution of written Vietnamese, I am also referencing translation of the poem into various languages, to allude to the distortion and misrepresentation prevalent in these texts and the manifold levels of meaning that accompany them. In this way, the construction of tapestry is utilised as a means of deconstructing text.

Research Paper

The paper aims to examine *Truyện Kiều* with a view to discussing female identity and roles in Vietnamese culture, through an analysis of the heroine in the poem. The character of Kiều represents Vietnamese womanhood because she demonstrates impeccable virtues of filial piety and submission. *Truyện Kiều* contains issues pertinent to the construction and perception of female sexual identity such as slavery, concubinage and in particular, prostitution, which is the prevailing condition experienced by Kiều. These issues reveal in the character of Kiều one distinctive trait that has persisted into contemporary Vietnamese society, that of female servitude. It is intended that the paper extends its focus to explore the issue of prostitution in Vietnam during and since the Vietnam and American conflict, with a specific aim to discuss Kiều's position as role model.

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Group Exhibition

- 1997 *Turn the Soil*, National touring exhibition, Craft Victoria (curated by Kevin Murray)
- 1996 *Re-affiliations*, Group 11, National touring exhibition
- Midnight Sun*, National exhibition of Vietnamese Australian artists, Access Gallery, National Gallery of Victoria
- 1995 *Female Identities - constructed and adopted*, Foyer Gallery, CSA
- 1994 *11th Tamworth Fibre/Textiles Biennial*, National touring exhibition, Tamworth City Gallery
- 1993 *Interval*, Graduating exhibition, CSA

Solo exhibition

- 1994 *The Weaving of Two Cultures*, Fibre Design Gallery, Goulburn

Publications

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Awards

- | | |
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| 1996 | Master of Arts (Visual Arts) Scholarship, CSA,ITA,ANU |
| 1993 | Mitchell Guirgola and Thorpe |
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Canberra School of Art - assistant to autistic student 1994-6
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